



COMMISSION ON VETERANS AFFAIRS

Testimony before the Montgomery County Council on the FY13 Operating Budget

April 10, 2012

Bill Gray, Chair – Jerry Godwin, Vice-Chair

Good evening, my name is Bill Gray and I am speaking on behalf of the Commission on Veterans Affairs. We appreciate the opportunity to share with you some of our top priorities for the upcoming year. Before using County dollars, we recommend that you set in place practices to take advantage of any and all federally funded programs by the Department of Veterans Affairs or other federal and state programs. For this to happen all agencies and contracted out services need to ask the intake question "Have you or an immediate family member ever served in the U.S. Armed forces, National Guard or Reserves? Then workers should refer these veterans to the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA), Veterans Service Officer located in Wheaton.

We also recommend that the County provide a more coordinated outreach to better assist Veterans in learning about and applying for the benefits they are entitled to from serving in the U.S. military. 70% of veterans never use any VA benefits at all. This is partially because they don't know how to go about getting them or don't even know about them. Veterans who served in World War II, Korea and Vietnam are too often unaware of their VA benefits related to issues including, but not limited to: agent orange, general health care, attendant care, and nursing home/supportive housing assistance for themselves and their spouses. Though this education is needed for those Veterans who have not been in the service for some time, this need is also true for our Post 9/11 Veterans.

We recommend that the County request that the MDVA provide a full time service officer in the County. This position would allow more veterans to access more benefits, which often translates into more income for the County. Currently, the MDVA has a veteran services officer at MontgomeryWorks in Wheaton Plaza on the first and third Friday of the month. The Commission has been in contact with the MDVA and plans are in the works to increase that MDVA representative to 3 days per week. We remain hopeful that this position will be granted full-time status in order to provide our Veterans and their families a level of consistency and reliability in service.

Veterans too often come back from war with problems that lead them into crime. We request that Council to ensure funding for the Criminal Justice Mental Health Pilot program that Raymond Crowel, in HHS, is working on. That would automatically involve dealing with the mental health issues of veterans involved in the criminal justice system.

We request that Council require all departments to apply for federal grants/seek out partnerships with the private and non-profit sector which would benefit Veterans, their spouses and children. Ideally, it will bring money and/or jobs to Montgomery County.

We were pleased this year that Housing Opportunities Commission (HOC) was awarded 15 HUD VASH vouchers for homeless veterans and their families in Montgomery County. These vouchers are provided from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) combined with case management services by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input. Please let us know how we can be of assistance.